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## **Beyond Factionalism to Unity: Labour under Starmer**

**Luke Martell**

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*The Labour leader has so far pursued a deliberately ambiguous approach to both party management and policy formation. But this is not as sustainable or electorally appealing as he thinks. Instead he should set out a substantive, inclusive, and ambitious political platform, based on the democratic economy and Green New Deal. These are policies around which the party can unite not only its own factions, but also a majority of the country.*

Early in the Labour leadership contest Rebecca Long-Bailey seemed most likely to get the support of the Corbyn-sympathetic membership. However, some who had not supported Corbyn joined the party to vote for Keir Starmer. Soft left and right members cast their ballot for him too. And some Corbynite opted for Starmer as the candidate perceived most likely to win the next general election, and as a contender who had said he would continue with significant planks of Corbynism. Starmer's statements during the contest stayed open enough to keep members from all wings of the party on board.

Starmer argued there was no point to Labour unless they could win power and that four times since 2010 they had excluded themselves from being in that position. Unity and an end to factionalism was, he said, key to electoral success. Starmer also commended Corbyn's shifting of Labour to an anti-austerity position and said he would not steer away from the broad policy direction of the previous leader.

This approach has led to technocratic ambiguity and factional anti-factionalism. What Starmer proposes in ideology and policy is unclear, deliberately so. Yet, he has to appeal across the UK's plural social structure, and across his own party. I think there are substantive policy bases on which he can do so and that he needs to build support for over time.

### **Nine Ways to Unity**

Starmer argued through the leadership contest for unity and an end to factionalism. We can't win if we keep 'taking lumps out of each other' was a frequent refrain. The candidates mostly stuck to this, the benefit for Starmer was that he was protected from criticism by the other contenders. Of course, he has also been seen as a disunifying figure, supporting the attempted coup against Corbyn and pushing the party's mixed position on Brexit that many, but not Starmer, saw as electorally damaging.

But what does unity mean and where will it lead? I want to outline what form it could take under Starmer and what a substantive approach could be to bridging across the party and electorate. There are several ways a party can pursue unity.<sup>1</sup>

First, it can be built by reconciling differences and building *consensus* on ideology and policy. But the Labour Party has always been a broad church, as its leaders have liked to repeat. Differences are of genuine ideological kinds, at the most basic level between mitigating social democrats who accept capitalism and reforming democratic socialists who want another kind of society, quite a big distinction, with many other positions along the spectrum. Factionalism is built into Labour, and politics generally is inherently conflictual. Variations of outlook within Labour can be healthy or pursued unhealthily. But there are essential ideological differences, and consensus across them is not possible.

A second approach is *compromise*. Factions of the party can reach a compromise over a programme that is far from perfect for any of them but which they can mostly agree on to win power and implement. So, a negotiated agreement. Agreed compromises are less than consensus, but more possible. Yet, they still require overcoming differences and so far Starmer is not proposing enough of substance on which negotiated agreement can be built. But he has only been leader for a few months and hopefully this is to come.

Thirdly, while factions may not be able to forge a consensus or negotiate an agreement they can compromise on, they could call a *truce or ceasefire* to stop infighting and win power. They may not all be able to sign up to the programme, but they can suppress dissent over it. This might be possible for a while, but a truce can only hold for so long under the pressure of real differences in ideology and policy. It will need to be built on something substantive in common, maybe coupled with one of the other options outlined. In fact, truce (option 3) with negotiated agreement (option 2) is what Starmer has said he means by unity.<sup>2</sup>

Fourthly, Starmer may be able to set out a *hegemonic* position, an ideological framework and policy programme that can mobilise people behind it. This may not all be agreed by everyone but hegemonic leadership around a narrative that wins enough acquiescence to establish dominance for his leadership can save the day. Here one faction or factions may lead, and the others fall into place. However, Starmer does not yet have an evident clear ideology or perspective and the dominant group in the PLP, the soft left, may not either. The soft left has tended to swing behind the dominant strand in the party and pursue moderately left policies that are electorally possible rather than having an approach that could become hegemonic.<sup>3</sup> The Corbynite left has more of a worked-out approach so Starmer could build from that to develop a hegemonic project.

A fifth method is more pragmatic: live with the differences in the party but try to *manage them*. Factions can be given enough in jobs and policies to keep them happy and behind the project. However, while the soft left in Starmer's Labour are getting the main jobs and the right more than before, the firm left are not being kept on board in terms of senior roles. And Starmer's policies are not clear enough to know if they can be a tool for managing the factions, including keeping the firm left on board.

A sixth and stronger approach is *marginalisation*. Rival groups are not kept behind the leader's project, but relegated to peripheral roles, away from influence. It involves marginalisation of some rather than unity of all. This is going on. In Starmer's early appointments to the Labour frontbench, the soft left took over dominance of the shadow cabinet with right-wingers given junior front bench roles. The number of Corbynites in top

teams was significantly reduced. This seems less an end to factionalism than one group being put in the driving seat and others kept down.

A more radical version of this (and seventh in our list) is not marginalising a group but *purging* them so they are no longer part of the party or project.<sup>4</sup> It seems unlikely that Starmer will pursue this as explicitly as Neil Kinnock did with Militant. But marginalisation of the left from top jobs in the party is going in the direction of a purge from influence. Furthermore, one way to purge is to side-line part of the party so much that they exclude themselves: purge by self-purge. Many on the firm left are sufficiently unhappy with the direction of travel under Starmer that they have left or resigned their roles.

The left have reasons to feel alienated. Given the tolerance of claimed anti-Semitism among centre and right MPs in the party, Rebecca Long-Bailey's sacking on this issue seems to have had an element of left-right politics to it, leaving no Corbynites in top shadow cabinet jobs, seen as a disunifying act and break with Corbynism.<sup>5</sup> Starmer has departed from supporting trade unions, for instance on the opening of schools, favouring capitalism over workers on the easing of lockdown. He has gone against party policy on Kashmir and supported a factional win for the right in the appointment of the party general secretary. Starmer has been ambivalent about Black Lives Matter, while hammering down on allegations of anti-Semitism in the party, suggesting to some an uneven approach to racism, guided by electoral considerations rather than principle.<sup>6</sup> He has appeared hesitant about the green new deal. He has not taken a stance on seemingly abusive comments in the leaked party report and evidence of Labour staff undermining party electoral success. This can be defended as procedurally correct when an inquiry is being carried out, but the comments were problematic by any standard and them being so was a reason for the inquiry. Whatever your judgement of such positions, for those on the left they amount to serial problems that are alienating and disunifying, apparently standing against the left more than reaching out to build unity with them. Subsequent self-purging by left-wingers has developed so far that a campaign has sprung up urging 'don't leave, organise'.

An eighth way of pursuing unity is through *ambiguity*. The leader is vague and promises things with enough lack of precision and concrete detail to avoid alienating people, but with enough put sufficiently abstractly to give all something and keep them on board. This seems to be what Starmer is doing so far.<sup>7</sup> His 10 pledges appear, on the surface, to keep to the Corbynite stance of the party: useful when appealing to members for their vote in the leadership contest.<sup>8</sup> They are defined in an abstract enough way to be acceptable to many, whilst open enough to take varying forms in practice. Starmer's pre-parliament past and his voting record as an MP make it difficult to pin down where his ideology and policy preferences lie. This could be because he genuinely is open within the bounds of his soft left instincts. The postponement of the 2020 Party conference made it possible for Starmer to further adjourn his commitment on policy.

Finally, Starmer can manage factions of the party by arguing that decisions need to be made *technocratically*: keeping groups together by saying ideology and policy have to be guided by what is possible to win power. Politics is inherently conflictual and so potentially disunifying. So, one way to achieve something that looks like unity is anti-political, suppressing politics through technocracy, arguing for the necessary to push aside difference

and contestation. Technocracy was what the anti-austerity left was replacing in parts of Europe, or trying to, rationalised as policy constraints imposed by supranational institutions. In Starmer's Labour, it is framed as pursuing professionalism and competence for electoral victory.

It seems that Starmer is carrying out a *combination* of some of these nine approaches: technocratic ambiguity, with marginalisation and elements of purging of the Corbynite left, replaced by the dominance of soft left and right. Marginalisation of a faction is not unity or anti-factionalism, but partial unity and suppression of a faction. We might call it *factional anti-factionalism*. This is coupled with ambiguity on substance. Starmer's Labour is not a return to either Blairism or Corbynism. A reversion to neoliberal social democracy is not so far sought by most in the Labour Party, and neither is a continuation of Corbynism wanted by the soft left or right. However, these are not being replaced yet with anything else of substance. Instead, we have ambiguity about the policies being pursued and a technocratic approach which emphasises competence, professionalism and electability: *technocratic ambiguity*.

All this assumes unity and anti-factionalism are desirable. But it depends what you mean by unity and factionalism. Pluralism, passion behind a perspective and conflicts of interest and ideology are the meat and drink of politics, and we should not wish to iron these out. The only way this could be done is by creating false homogeneity and eclipsing some views as invalid or unacceptable. If anti-factionalism means excluding genuine divisions of views it is taking the politics and pluralism out of politics and we ought not want this. If what is happening is adherence to your own tribe and attacking others for the sake of it and because they do not belong to your tribe, this is unhealthy, and does happen. Starmer has said he is against this kind of factionalism rather than pluralism. But diversity and conflict are often over genuine differences of opinion, and pluralism lends itself to factionalism because people group together to advance their beliefs and policies against others. You can try to solve excessive factionalism by negotiated agreement, if not consensus, but Starmer seems to be trying to fix it by marginalising some perspectives in the diversity of the party. So, the approach is action against factions rather than for agreement, negative rather than positive, exclusionary rather than inclusive, and pushing away rather than reaching out. Starmer's actions so far suggest he sees leftist views as to be managed rather than worked with, moved aside rather than negotiated with.

### **Beyond Technocratic Ambiguity and Factional Anti-Factionalism**

If electability is the aim, what will win votes to get Labour into power? One approach is to stick to professionalism and competence, with manufactured unity and the suppression of factionalism by the suppression of factions. The hope is this will appeal to the electorate across the board. The party avoids too much in the way of ideas or policies that could win over parts of Labour's complex social base but at the expense of alienating others. Pundits have argued for competence as the top electoral priority, advising against appealing on the basis of policy now.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective Corbyn's leadership was not competent or professional and Starmer's approach and shadow cabinet choices show a return to competence.

If policy is to be developed, it is argued, the party should orient to where voters are, rather than where Labour wants them to be. Starmer's appointment of Claire Ainsley as his Director of Policy suggests he is navigating down this road. She has argued that finding what working-class voters feel and adapting policy to that is the way to go, rather than starting from trying to persuade them of the policies you feel will benefit them.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is not clear that lack of professionalism or competence were what put electors off Corbyn in the 2019 election, and in the era of Trump and Johnson these may not be the markers of Prime Minister material for many voters. What gets sneered at as incompetence in political leadership is often more the outcome of difficult politics than the absence of capability; the handling of anti-Semitism and the party's position on Brexit under Corbyn arguably being examples. Furthermore, documented accounts indicate a shortage of professionalism may have come through subversion in the Labour Party as much as from the leader.

Starmer's personal poll ratings signal that perceived professionalism allied with ambiguity on policy may be working. Electoral support for the party and public confidence in its competence to manage the economy have been lagging behind but improving, although assisted by chaotic government. But it is in substance as much as style that Labour needs to win support for the next election. Not building support for policy, and ambiguity on some of it, were part of what sunk Labour at the 2019 general election. Of course, clarity on substance and policy could come later once Starmer has established an image of competence and professionalism. But Starmer himself said during the leadership campaign that Labour needs to define policy early and build the case for it over time. The electorate is diverse along many lines, and Labour requires support across it, meaning that promises made to some groups that are less appealing to others will not work. However real unity and wide appeal can be made on the basis of policy. This can be on Labour's democratic economy and green new deal policies. These were central to Labour's programme under Corbyn but kept quiet in the 2019 election campaign.<sup>11</sup>

Across the Labour Party, social ownership in one form or another has appeal. It is classic Labour territory and part of the mainstream again. Social ownership proposals under Corbyn were diverse: local and national, decentralised and centralised, from co-ops to state ownership, in a market rather than a planned economy, providing something for all wings of the party to agree with. Where public ownership of rail, mail, energy and water were proposed this was not simply in the form of old-style state ownership, even though that is back in vogue, but more democratically inclusive ownership and localised forms, incorporating workers, managers, consumers and communities in democratic control and with clear social and ethical rather than just efficiency goals. Social ownership, furthermore, is not just an idea. In addition to its longstanding past in practice internationally, it has successful concrete bases in recent initiatives like community wealth building in UK and USA municipalities where local government procurement is used to ensure money is reinvested in poor areas, co-ops and social and ethical aims rather than disappearing away to corporate shareholders and goals that benefit them.

Corbyn put public ownership back on the agenda and the politics of Covid-19 have demonstrated the role for state intervention and planning for need, allowing the case to be

made for planning but on a democratic basis. If we cannot take the chance for advocating the democratic economy now, then when can we? We should avoid a repeat of the sort of lost opportunity after the financial crisis to argue for a long term, regulatory, public investment and egalitarian approach.

The green new deal also has resonance. Labour is committed to tackling climate change and the new deal proposes to do this through industrial restructuring and investment in green industry to create jobs and demand that assist the unemployed, working class, poor, excluded and minorities, and simultaneously reduce carbon emissions. The democratic economy and green new deal can stimulate support from the right to the left in the party, all of whom are behind their social restructuring and environmental ends and can find something in the diverse means for pursuing them, local and national, democratic and inclusive. They can bring substance to Starmer's emphasis on unity, through negotiated agreement, the second method for pursuing accommodation outlined above, which, while short of consensus, can be a basis also for the third approach (outlined above) of truce and ceasefire.

The same bridging can be done with such policies across the public. Polling suggests the electorate are willing to vote for action on climate change and support the green new deal including in areas Labour needs to hold or win.<sup>12</sup> Social ownership policies also have public support.<sup>13</sup> From post-industrial towns to wider sections of society the electorate want to see investment, economic rejuvenation and measures to tackle insecurity, exclusion and poverty, something both policy approaches aim at and have concrete records on. Economic revival to tackle unemployment and exclusion coupled with green change and local inclusive democracy relate to the politics of both post-industrial-town working-class voters and young educated metropolitan electors.<sup>14</sup> This is a better way to go policy-wise than staying ambiguous on policy to avoid the risk of alienating someone, or by appealing to the lowest common denominator. It is vital for Labour to win seats in Scotland and this approach will have to be coupled with radical proposals for devolution. Furthermore, an economy of community investment fits with post Covid-19 rebuilding in an era where austerity has less of a ring to it than ten years ago.

One of Starmer's criticisms of the 2019 electoral strategy is that there were too many policies propounded, some introduced too late to be built for. Labour needs a focused narrative for the next election, built over time. Democratic economy and green new deal policies are in place in detail and could be the axis around which this is done. The left is at an advanced state policy-wise and in a good place to construct support for well-established policies. The solution is to make the politics work for the policy and use policy as the basis for the politics.<sup>15</sup> It is not to side-line policy especially where it meets the criterion for a focused, substantive message with appeal across groups.

Starmer appears at this stage to be pursuing technocratic ambiguity and factional anti-factionalism in the name of unity and election victory. But he can move from ambiguity to ambitious substance and bring together factions with policies that have an appeal to different wings of the party and across the electorate from the young, middle class and educated, public sector and private sector voters, to the more working class and excluded. It's a positive approach to reducing factionalism and building unity.

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<sup>1</sup> Three outlined by Oliver Eagleton, 'What Keir Starmer's Ambition of 'Unity' Really Means', *Novara Media*, 20 April 2020: <https://novaramedia.com/2020/04/20/what-keir-starmers-ambition-of-unity-really-means/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ayesha Hazarika and Joe Murphy, 'Keir Starmer: I won't be defined by our past leaders', *Evening Standard*, 1 May 2020: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-i-won-t-be-defined-by-our-past-leaders-a4429356.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Trevor Fisher and Eric Shaw, 'Labour is a soft-left party – the 2020 leadership elections prove it', *LabourList*, 8 April 2020: <https://labourlist.org/2020/04/labour-is-a-soft-left-party-the-2020-leadership-elections-prove-it/>.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Michael Calderbank for this point. An earlier shorter version of this article was published on his Labourhub site.

<sup>5</sup> Sienna Rodgers, 'Keir Starmer breaks decisively with the Corbyn Era', *LabourList*, 25 June 2020: <https://labourlist.org/2020/06/keir-starmer-decisively-breaks-with-the-corbyn-era/>.

<sup>6</sup> Damien Gayle, 'Hierarchy of racism' fears threaten Starmer's hopes of Labour unity', *Guardian*, 13 August 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/aug/13/hierarchy-of-racism-fears-threaten-starmers-hopes-of-labour-unity>.

<sup>7</sup> Keir Starmer, 'Labour can win again if we make the moral case for socialism', *Guardian*, 15 January 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/15/labour-socialism-values-election-economic-model>.

<sup>8</sup> Keir Starmer, 'My Pledges to You', *keirstarmer.com*, 2020: <https://keirstarmer.com/plans/10-pledges/>

<sup>9</sup> Dylan Spielman, 'Can Keir Starmer win a majority for Labour?' *Medium*, 11 April 2020: <https://medium.com/@dylan.spielman22/can-keir-starmer-win-a-majority-for-labour-1432503c17da>; Adam McNicholas, '7 lessons for Keir Starmer's new opposition frontbench', *LabourList*, 17 April 2020, <https://labourlist.org/2020/04/7-lessons-for-keir-starmers-new-opposition-frontbench/>.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Ainsley, 'Winning back the Working Class', *Progressive Review*, Vol 25, No 2, 2018, 195-201.

<sup>11</sup> Joe Guinan and Sarah McKinley, 'Hanging in the balance: the democratic economy after Corbyn', *Renewal* Vol 28, No 1, 2020, 16-25; Adrienne Buller, 'Where next for the Green New Deal?', *Renewal*, Vol 28, No 1, 2020, 26-36.

<sup>12</sup> Client Earth, 'Climate policies could determine next election as public demands action to tackle "greatest challenge facing humankind"', *ClientEarth*, 30 October 2019: <https://www.clientearth.org/press/climate-policies-could-determine-next-election-as-public-demands-action-to-tackle-greatest-challenge-facing-humankind/>; New Economics Foundation, '68% of those in Labour-held marginal seats in North & Midlands say climate change important deciding factor when voting at this election', *Neweconomics*, 28 November 2019: <https://neweconomics.org/2019/11/68-of-those-in-labour-held-marginal-seats-in-north-and-midlands-say-climate-change-important-deciding-factor-when-voting-at-this-election>.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Goodwin, 'Corbynomics' Is More Popular Than You Think', *Bloomberg*, 2 Oct 2019: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-10-02/jeremy-corbyn-s-labour-party-are-onto-something>. 'Nationalisation has Public Support says Expert', *Greenwich University*, 31 January 2020: <https://www.gre.ac.uk/articles/public-relations/david-hall-nationalisation>.

<sup>14</sup> As urged by Jonny Ball, 'Election 2019 and the Newer Left', *Renewal*, Vol 28, No 3, 2020: 65-74.

<sup>15</sup> Guinan and McKinley 'Hanging in the Balance'.